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Iron and Pregnancy

Having low iron in pregnancy is very common. If you are using the Life Labs online access to check your own results, please note that normal results for many lab tests in pregnancy are different. You may have results that are highlighted as abnormal when they are in fact fine because you are pregnant. However, in general, your Hemoglobin should be over 110 and Ferritin should be over 15 in pregnancy. Here are a few things you might like to know about iron.

Why is Iron Important?

- Babies and children need iron for healthy brain development
- Babies need iron from their mothers most in the third trimester to prepare for the first years of life
- Low iron puts you at risk of having a very small baby or delivering your baby too early
- Usually the baby will take all he or she needs from the mother, which leaves you feeling tired, and less able to handle the blood loss after giving birth.

How Much Iron Do I need?

- During pregnancy you need around 27mg elemental iron everyday
- Before/after pregnancy you should get 18mg elemental iron everyday
- Most pregnant women get this amount from eating a well-balanced diet and taking a daily prenatal vitamin that contains iron.
- Some women need to take iron supplements to prevent iron deficiency.

What Foods are High in Iron?

There are two types of iron found in the foods we eat:

- *Heme* iron: found in meat, fish, chicken, turkey: is well absorbed by our bodies.
- *Nonheme* iron, found in grains, vegetables, fruits, tofu, beans, nuts and seeds: is not as well absorbed.
 - Foods high in vitamin C can help your body absorb non-heme iron better.
 - Include products such as orange juice, tomatoes, strawberries and grapefruit in your daily diet.
 - Coffee, tea and calcium rich foods (milk, yogurt, cheese) block iron absorption. Try to separate these from iron-rich foods.

Iron Supplements

- Don't take extra iron unless it has been recommended by your health care provider
- If your iron is low after a blood test, we will tell you how much to take
- Since iron pills can cause constipation, it is important to get enough fiber and water each day.
- Separate your iron pill and your prenatal vitamin (and/or calcium pill)
- Separate iron from coffee/ tea/ calcium rich foods like milk/ antacids/ thyroid pills
- Do not take iron pills unless your doctor recommends them.
- ALWAYS keep iron pills and multivitamins with iron out of reach from children.

Tips to Limit Side Effects from Iron

1. Take the pills with meals (BUT this reduces absorption by 50%)
2. Start with small doses and work your way up to the full dose slowly. For example, try taking one pill a day for a few days, then two pills until you aren't bothered by that amount. Increase the number of pills until you're taking the amount your health care provider recommends.
3. Talk to your health care provider about different options that might be easier to take and less side effects.
4. Reduce constipation by drinking more water and by eating more fiber. Fiber is found in whole grain foods, breakfast cereals, fruits and vegetables. Talk to your dietitian about high fibre options that will work for you.